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A New Generation of TV Wimps

He's pretty happy. He respects his wife, loves his kids, helps around the house. So how come he feels like a total loser? Welcome to the new sitcom.

By AMY CHOZICK



The dynamics of men on TV are changing. The 2011 sitcom man is effete but also confident; devoted to his family, happy to pull his weight around the house and generally more afraid of his wife than of the corporate boss. Amy Chozick explains.



MANNISH BOYS: The ensemble cast of 'Man Up'

'My grandfather fought in World War II. My dad was a cop in New York in the 1960s and '70s during the riots in the Bronx,' says TV writer Christopher Moynihan. 'I'm in my 30s, wear Converse every day and drink nondairy hazelnut creamer.'

His sitcom, "Man Up!," premieres on ABC this fall and follows three men who struggle with what it means to be a real man "in a world of Axe ads." It's one of a half dozen coming sitcoms that center on lead male characters contemplating their masculinity in a changing world, especially in terms of the successful women who surround them.

Will, the lead character in "Man Up," sells insurance but puts most of his energy into finding his 13-year-old son the perfect birthday gift that says "I'm the man!" As Will giddily cracks open his latest videogame, his wife affectionately describes him as "man-ish."

One new sitcom "Free Agents," premiering on NBC this fall, stars Hank Azaria as a divorced office worker. The opening scene shows Mr. Azaria bursting into tears after sex.

Studio and network executives say that this year they heard more pitches than ever before for shows about the changing dynamics of men.

"Manliness is under assault," says Todd Holland, executive producer of "Free Agents." "That's the premise."

Some call the trend "wussification" or "feminization." Others say it's just wimpy guys who want to be macho and have no clue how to do it. But it's subtler than that.

These aren't single metrosexuals obsessed with grooming and interior design, or the disheveled slackers of Judd Apatow movies. Nor are they the bumbling working-class fathers whose wives ruled the roost in "Roseanne" or "The King of Queens."

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[Saturday Essay Where Have The Good Men Gone? \(2/19/2011\)](#)



Last year 154,000 stay-at-home dads took care of 287,000 children under the age of 15, compared with 49,000 stay-at-home dads in 1996, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In April, men made up more than 56% of the 13.7 million unemployed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics



Christina Applegate and Will Arnett in "Up All Night"

They're not trying to run away from their spouses.

The 2011 sitcom man may be effete compared with his predecessors, but he's confident, devoted to his family, happy working around the house, pretty good at child-rearing.

In many of the coming sitcoms, men are the primary caregivers. Last year 154,000 stay-at-home dads took care of 287,000 children under the age of 15, compared with 49,000 stay-at-home dads in 1996, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Marketers who buy advertising time on prime-time TV have taken note. Last year Procter & Gamble's Pampers brand conducted a study in which 80% of dads said they do most of the diaper-changing or an equal share. (Only 35% of moms surveyed agreed with this assessment, however.) New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees recently served as a Pampers spokesman.

Still, there's angst: "He'd have to get his wife's approval before storming the beach [at Normandy]," says Mr. Moynihan, who stars in 'Man Up' as well as executive-produces it.

Season of the Wuss

Six shows coming up this television season feature guys wrestling with their place in what feels like a woman's world.

Ed O'Neill,
who played the
harried Al
Bundy in



846-14

'Work It' (ABC)

A couple of man's men lose their jobs when the Pontiac dealership closes, so they dress like women to get work selling pharmaceuticals. They learn a lot about women and become more sensitive in the process.

Brian: This isn't just a recession we're in, it's a man-cession. Women are taking over the workforce.



NBC

'Up All Night'

'Up All Night' (NBC)

Chris, a reformed partier played by Will Arnett, stays home to raise baby Amy when his career-driven wife, Reagan (Christina Applegate), goes back to work.

Chris: *I just did a solo Target experience. Have you ever checked out the snack bar? It's actually a really eclectic crowd.*



ABC

'Man Up!'

'Man Up!' (ABC)

Three adult male friends who play videogames and hail Tobey Maguire as the ultimate man try to get in touch with their macho sides.

Will's wife: *"I'm sorry honey, but your grandfather fought in World War II, your father fought in Vietnam, but you play videogames and use pomegranate body wash."*



ABC

'Last Man Standing'

'Last Man Standing' (ABC)

A father of three daughters with a successful wife, Mike Baxter (Tim Allen) feels like the last real man trapped in a woman's world... and doesn't like it.

Mike: "What the heck is fantasy football? I've got a fantasy, why don't you get off the freakin' couch, you morons."



CBS

'How to Be a Gentleman'

'How to Be a Gentleman' (CBS)

Andrew, a well-mannered magazine columnist, recruits an old high-school bully to teach him how to be a "real" man.

Andrew: I am one of the last of my kind, those who came before me ruled the world. Every day I carry on their proud legacy. I open the door for a lady but I am not a doorman.



NBC

'Free Agents'

'Free Agents' (NBC)

Hank Azaria plays Alex, an emotional divorcee who hooks up with a co-worker and can't seem to stop himself from crying after sex.

Co-worker: We can't talk for five minutes without you going maudlin over your kids, or having an existential crisis or crying.... You are an absolute mess. You're crying right now. Are you aware of that?

"Married...With Children" and now stars as a more modern dad in "Modern Family," recalls a different era, growing up in Youngstown, Ohio. "Guys were out on the porch drinking and talking about sports and women were in the other room talking, I don't know what about. It was simple," he says.

All of this has been changing for decades, and by now, most men have accepted the change. They still just aren't quite sure how to deal with it. TV producers are betting viewers will find this funny.

"We're showing how guys are growing and maturing and evolving by listening to women more than they traditionally have," says "Friends" writer Ted Cohen, who executive produces the new sitcom "Work It." The show, about two St. Louis men who get laid off at a Pontiac dealership and must dress like women in order to get a job selling pharmaceuticals, will premiere on ABC in midseason.

When Mr. Cohen and his partner Andrew Reich pitched the show to Warner Bros. Television, which produces it, they brandished numbers showing a decline in manufacturing and construction jobs and an increase in nursing and teaching. Males account for around 75% of the 2008 decline in employment. In 1970 married women contributed 2% to 6% of their families' household income, compared with as much as 36% in 2007, according to a study by the Pew Research Center.

"This isn't just a recession we're in, it's a man-cession," a character in "Work It" laments.

Successful sitcoms have a way of reflecting reality, producers and executives say, even though they must be conventional enough to appease advertisers, appeal to the masses, and get laughs.

"Pitches often come in with, 'Hey, America is talking about this and therefore you should let me write a TV show about it.' Oftentimes, they're right," says David Stapf, president of CBS Television Studios.

The past decade has been a dry one for sitcoms, with even the few successes, such as "Two and a Half Men," "The Big Bang Theory" and "Modern Family," overshadowed by reality shows like "American Idol" and escapist dramas like "NCIS."

Broadcast networks have ordered an unusually large number of sitcoms for the coming season, with 15 half-hour comedies debuting on ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox, up from 13 last year.

Many of the ideas for shows executives fielded sounded the same theme: Writers talk about how men are taking a more active role in child rearing, with more women serving as the primary breadwinners. One CBS executive said that about 20 producers cited, in pitches, an article titled "The End of Men" about "the unprecedented role reversal now under way" published in the Atlantic magazine last year.

"The equal-rights movement actually worked, and as a result those [kids who were] brought up in a totally different environment in which girls could do all the things boys did, see a blurring of the [gender] lines now that they're adults," says Jack MacKenzie, president of Magid Generational Strategies at research firm Frank N. Magid Associates.

In September, CBS will premiere "How to Be a Gentleman" about a preppy, well-mannered magazine columnist. He reunites with an old high-school bully, played by Kevin Dillon, who teaches him how to toughen up.

Another ABC show is "Last Man Standing," starring Tim Allen as a father of three girls who provides regular diatribes about the softening of American men. (The pitch: "Today, it's a woman's world and this man's man is on a mission to get men back to their rightful place in society.")

"What happened to men?" Mr. Allen's Mike Baxter, a marketing director at an outdoors-sporting-goods store, says in the pilot. "Men used to build cities just so we could burn them down.... But modern men, what do you do? You run from stuff, responsibility, fatherhood. You can't even change a tire. A tire!"

Mr. Allen, whose power-tool-toting dad in "Home Improvement" made that sitcom a No. 1 hit, wanted to return to TV but was waiting for the right script that could expand on his stand-up routines that poke clean fun at the less-manly modern man, says Samie Kim Falvey, senior vice president of comedy at ABC Entertainment Group. That prompted a flood of pitches and spec scripts designed to lure Mr. Allen.

Executive producer Jack Burditt based "Last Man Standing" on his own experiences raising three daughters. "They were easy, nice, little princesses when they were young and suddenly they became teenagers," Mr. Burditt

says.

Part of what makes a show about a man trapped in a woman's world so appealing to network TV is that it has the potential to attract both sexes, industry executives say. In focus groups, men identified with Mr. Allen's rants, while women related to raising girls and a smart, career-oriented wife played by Nancy Travis ("So I Married an Axe Murderer"), says Dana Walden, chairman of 20th Century Fox Television, which makes "Last Man Standing" and, like The Wall Street Journal, is owned by News Corp.

"In a world when women are succeeding and sometimes surpassing the careers of their husbands, that produces conflict and conflict produces comedy," Ms. Walden says.

Of Mice and Men

Let us now praise girlie men, metrosexuals and 98-pound weaklings

"But I am pigeonliver'd and lack gall."

—William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet'

"All men are afraid in battle. The coward is the one who lets his fear overcome his sense of duty."

—Gen. George S. Patton

"...it is clear to men that the images of adult manhood given by the popular culture are worn out; a man can no longer depend on them."

—Robert Bly, 'Iron John,' 1990

"Don't be economic girlie men."

—Arnold Schwarzenegger, 2004

"We've become a nation of wusses."

—Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell, 2010

"Exporting Raymond.")



Everett Collection

Despite mishaps, Tim Allen in 'Home Improvement' knew his way around sheet rock.



Ross MacDonald

A strong woman kicking around a hapless man-child is a sitcom staple designed to appeal to women viewers who watch more TV than men. Even Jackie Gleason's short-tempered Ralph Kramden on "The Honeymooners" ultimately answered to Alice, says "Everybody Loves Raymond" creator Phil Rosenthal.

On a trip to Moscow to help adapt his hit sitcom for Russian audiences, Mr. Rosenthal met with local producers who argued that Russian men are stronger than Americans and would reject a dynamic in which the Raymond character is pushed around by his wife and mother.

"I thought, 'That's baloney.' Even if Putin was out killing a bear with his bare hands, he'd come home and his wife would tell him not to come in with those muddy shoes," Mr. Rosenthal says. (He was right: "Everybody Loves Raymond" became a hit in Russia. Adapting it prompted the recent documentary

Dating back to when Jim Anderson plopped down on the sofa to dispense wisdom in "Father Knows Best," sitcom men have historically represented a compensatory or idealized version of what a man should be, says Michael Kimmel, author of "Manhood in America." In the 1950s, middle-class fathers served as strong providers, but only on TV did dads also make time for their families.

"You knew that at 17 minutes after the hour, he'd [Jim Anderson] come downstairs, sit on the sofa and talk about the problem of the day. It was the perfect fantasy father," says producer Robert L. Boyett, who tried to recreate this ideal father when he executive produced "Happy Days."

"Modern Family" co-creator Christopher Lloyd says the lunkhead dad who sits on the sofa with his hand in his pants while his wife runs circles around him has become a sitcom stereotype. For Mr. O'Neill's current character Jay Pritchett, he wanted to find a different version of a husband and a father that painted a broader picture of a modern patriarch. A recent episode about Jay's birthday, in which his fishing trip is ruined by family obligations, closes with him and his stepson, Manny, sitting on a fishing boat in his backyard pool. The script reads: "His family starts to gather around him. It's not the birthday he

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wanted, but it's not half bad either."

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Katy Perry

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Glee Tour - East Rutherford

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